

Indigenous Encounters

Reflections on Relations between People in the Pacific

Katerina Martina Teaiwa

He aha te mea nui?

What is the most important thing?

*He tāngata. He tāngata. He
tāngata.*

It is people. It is people. It is people.

Māori Proverb

You cannot buy with money what can be gained by caring for people, especially your neighbors, says Delgadina Perez Hiton. Having lived for seven decades, Tan Del insists that relationships among people are the only enduring thing a person can count on.

Laura M. Torres Souder, *Daughters of the Island*

RELATIONSHIPS

A few years ago my father told me of an experience he had on Rabi Island in the northern part of Fiji. He said he was walking through Nuku town past the police station when a man stopped him and introduced himself. When the man said his name my father instantly knew who he was, though they had never met. The man asked him for thirty dollars. My father gave it to him immediately, with no questions about what he needed it for, or why he should give him the money. Later he explained to me that in the 1940s his mother, who was on her home island of Tabiteuea in Kiribati, had been struggling and needed money to help her family get to Banaba to see my grandfather. She went to a man in her village and asked for some help. Without question he gave her a hundred dollars he'd saved. The man at Nuku on Rabi, fifty years later and over a thousand miles from Tabiteuea, was his grandson.

In researching Banaban history these last ten years or so, I have been struck by just how much an active discourse of “difference” still exists between Banabans and I-Kiribati, in spite of interdependent relations on the ground.¹ Our home islands are part of one nation, and our people almost always related by genealogy. We share ideas, we share dances, we share kinship, and we share a problematic colonial history. However, the displacement of Banabans from their home island in Kiribati to Fiji in 1945 because of British, Australian, and New Zealand phosphate mining has transformed peoples’ perceptions of belonging and cultural identity.

Despite growing up in “multicultural Fiji,” fully aware of the politically tense Indo-Fijian and Fijian relations, I did not actively think about those between or within the other diverse groups who all call Fiji home. These include Rotumans, I-Kiribati, Banabans, Samoans, Tongans, Cook Islanders, New Zealanders, Australians, Chinese, descendents of Melanesian laborers, and people of mixed heritage. After the first coup in 1987, like many Indo-Fijians, some of our Banaban elders thought that perhaps they too were unwelcome in Fiji. We went from being on the indigenous electoral roll to being in a category called “Others,” drastically altering our relationship to the national politic and to our Fijian neighbors on Taveuni and Vanua Levu. An awareness of intense conflicts over identity and power among peoples so closely related, or who have lived together as communities for decades, pushed me to think more about strategic identifications and intra-Pacific relations. Reflecting on how I felt on 19 May 2000, standing in the middle of Suva as people ran in panic in response to the third Fiji coup, I became concerned about my lack of conceptual tools for understanding relations *between* Islanders.

As a student in Pacific Islands studies in the mid 1990s I found the decolonization framework promoted by Pacific scholars, writers, and activists very attractive and cathartic. It provided an outlet for all the hang-ups I’d had about being a minority in Fiji, and in the United States where I attended university. However, after teaching Pacific Islands studies for almost four years at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UHM) and reading my own students’ reflections, I now realize that the language I had learned in order to understand the dynamics of interethnic, intercultural, and interregional relations was limited. While women’s studies, post-colonial studies, and cultural studies offered multiple tools to think about differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, and sometimes

religion, they rarely engaged with discourses of indigeneity, often written off as essentialist constructions of culture. Thus, the “place-based” and spiritual dimensions of human relations are sometimes ignored in the very scholarly fields that critically engage power relations. I also found that the concept of kinship, so thoroughly researched in anthropology, and indeed focused on indigenous relations and place, did not always account for those in the contemporary and urban Pacific between Islanders of different cultures or classes.

Growing up in Fiji as a person of mixed Banaban, I-Kiribati, and African American heritage, experiencing the coups in 1987 and 2000, and now teaching Pacific studies, I find it hard not to be hyperconscious of ethnic and cultural differences and the ways in which history, power, religion, and economics shape the contemporary Pacific. When I visited Suva in 2005 and attended the annual concert of my alma mater, St. Joseph’s Secondary School, I was moved to see the girls on stage actively trying to address ethnic tensions through their theater, music, and dance.² Such activities remind me that we need to pay attention to the diverse and creative ways in which people on the ground deal with intercultural relations.

ENCOUNTERS

In *Indigenous Encounters* I wanted to move away from broad generalizations about a common Pacific region or identity, racial binaries, and assumptions that all Fijians, Banabans, or Tongans think and act alike—and look more closely at the relations between people in everyday contexts. As teachers, researchers, students, and Islanders who live in this ocean, we are often caught up in the politics of daily life, where difference is negotiated, and practices and ideas are shared but rarely theorized. Articulating either the tensions or productive exchanges in our home islands is sometimes more challenging in Pacific Islands studies when our intellectual frameworks on race and culture are polarizing, or more reflective of a continental experience.

The relations represented by many of the pieces in *Indigenous Encounters* are not those between colonizers and natives, although those concepts are often real and necessary. It is the assumption of unequal power relations along old colonial lines in the contemporary Pacific that sometimes leads to an assumption of western superiority and

indigenous victimization. This ignores indigenous agency as well as the ways in which life in the Pacific is shaped by other factors—such as national and regional political and economic agendas, and particularly the security agenda, as well as religion, gender, education, class, and opportunity. Many of our problems today have less to do with “black and white” issues and more to do with relations between migrants and locals, between classes or gendered groups, and within indigenous communities. It is often likely that we engage such tensions more in comedy than in scholarship.³ As struggles for political representation and economic survival become more intense, the complex protocols that our ancestors once employed for dealing with difference and connection between and across families, tribes, clans, valleys, rivers, and islands are increasingly relegated to the past or to the realm of the symbolic.

There is such an immense diversity of languages, cultures, and historical experiences in the Pacific that it is sometimes hard to justify a regional identity. While the terms *Melanesia*, *Micronesia*, and *Polynesia* have been productively embraced by many, and nation-based identifications are widely accepted, these divisions often enhance the gap between Islanders. Yet the Pacific has still-traceable genealogical ties that extend across cultural boundaries and connect us all. There are also contemporary alliances, formed particularly between Islanders in urban or diasporic contexts. We gesture to these past and present connections in regional political, performance, educational, and sports gatherings. However, true regional dialogue over economic and political options is fraught by continuing struggles with traditional and western forms of government and models of development, and with the push to make liberal democracy work in our particular cultural and economic contexts. In the meantime, our island environments and resources become subject to exploitation, global climate change, and other forces, and the Pacific Islands continue to function as a space for Australia, New Zealand, France, and the United States to apply their security priorities regardless of our needs.

Many of the answers we seek for conceptual and practical tools to deal with intra-Pacific relations, and options for regional survival, are to be found in indigenous philosophies and practices themselves. To see these possibilities often requires new forms of literacy for reading the performance or visual forms in which they lie. This is well illustrated by Vaimu’a Muliava’s contribution to the collection. His tattoo/tatau art and

the explanation accompanying it indicate how tradition may be lived and reconstructed in the present without losing a sense of continuity with the past and with an awareness of the politics of culture. His design is elaborated and articulated across a system that spans several islands and cultural and national groupings—`Uvea, Futuna, Tahiti, Fiji, Tonga, Sāmoa, Rotuma, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia.

Muliava explains his art in a way that is rare, but as conservator, scholar, artist, and traveling Uvean, he is able to draw on his multiple literacies combining research, oral traditions, and a knowledge of practice in the lived environment. In his tattoo he thus constructs a living pattern that encounters, connects, and relates elements of the past, present, and future, between multiple islands, political and cultural systems, peoples, practices, plants, and animals. He then grounds these in the meaning of actions, words, and symbols. His pattern, translated as “The shark eats the ocean and spreads his culture over the land,” eats through the pages and spreads its mark across the entire *Indigenous Encounters* collection.

CONTRIBUTORS

The authors in this collection delve more deeply into encounters within and between groups or individuals on the ground, reflecting on specific events, places, observations, and experiences. Most are graduate students who are publishing for the first time. The goal of the project was to encourage upcoming scholars to think about the theme, publish their ideas, and consider continuing their work in Pacific studies. It is important that we nurture a critical mass of younger writers, artists, and scholars in and of the region, and I hope this publication contributes to that process. Few limitations were set on the genre of submissions. The University of Hawai`i's Center for Pacific Islands Studies encourages students to explore their research in both creative and conventional styles, recognizing that for centuries in the Pacific, knowledge was shared and archived in oral, visual, material, and embodied forms. As a result students have started to produce master's projects in both written and multimedia formats.

This collection is divided into six themes, reflecting the concerns of the authors. In “Learning Oceania,” we begin with Brandy Nālani McDougall's poetry on the voyages of the ancestors, the birth of a people from the sea, and, much later, the attempts of the

famous artist Paul Gauguin to capture the mystery of this history in a woman who is watched over by the dead and living. Monica LaBriola explores the lived meaning of genealogy and family connections in her narrative, followed by a critical reflection on learning and becoming part of the Marshall Islands community in the North Pacific. Christopher Robbins's experience is similar, albeit in an institutional context in the South Pacific. Both he and Monica come in as teachers from the United States and in the process become students of the Pacific.

In "Oceans and Islands," Greg Dvorak and Kali Fermantez engage the ocean as both metaphor and fluid substance for connecting Marshallese, Japanese, Americans, and Hawaiians to global communities. Greg situates his scholarship both in broader historical and imperial contexts and in the material reef and coral that make up the Marshallese archipelago. He then reflects on the ways in which multiple and diverse individuals and communities call Kwajalein "home." Kali weaves critical theory and Pacific cultural studies in his analysis of a Hawaiian surf company called Da Hui Inc., situating its history in the contexts of both local surfing relations on the North Shore and global surfing business interests.

There is poignant comic relief in "Between Sisters," as we follow the journey of Sara Lightner in her first encounters with the Catholic nuns on the island of Pentecost in Vanuatu. Her piece is followed by the writing of two artistic siblings of Papua New Guinean and Australian descent, Yola and Julia Gray, both frank but loving in their delivery, sparring over their elder and younger "sisterness." The works by these three authors give us a vivid image of the everyday exchanges of women in the Pacific.

The poems by Emelihter Kihleng and B. David Kombako in "Post-Colonial Reflections?" illustrate some of the more disconcerting aspects of Pacific life in the diaspora and urban centers of Oceania. Here, class, identity, and consumption practices reflect the disconnection and displacement Islanders experience in the post-colonial American context. New consumption practices and iconic symbols are particularly highlighted. There is a question mark in the section title and a hyphen in the first word because it is debatable as to whether there is anything "post" colonial about this situation.

"Institutional Relations" engages the ways in which Islanders attempt to negotiate identity and come together within an academic setting. Contrary to the ways in which

categories such as *Pacific*, *Oceania*, and *Pasifika* appear to gather everyone under a regional umbrella, the reality in the university is less than organic, and alliance building and resource sharing have to be actively nurtured and supported. Tanya Wendt Samu, and coauthors Lu`ukia Archer, Malia Ka`aihue, and U`i Keli`ikuli give us some insight into these issues at the University of Auckland and the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa, respectively. Samu in particular encourages us to think about regional terms such as *Pacific Islander* and *Pasifika* that appear to unify diverse groups. She also outlines various practices in the educational context that are recognized and accepted as “Pasifika.”

We end with “Embodied Encounters,” in which Pacific peoples literally “feel” the process of engagement and negotiation, of both the empowering and violent variety, in their bodies. Karen Ingersoll reimagines the violence in the body of the viti bird, which signifies a larger struggle between her protagonist and the process of cultural and political change within her community. Trisha Kehaulani Watson finds growth, personal empowerment, and memory in her encounters with Māori in Aotearoa. Name-calling is probably one of the most potent ways by which people negatively engage those of another culture or ethnicity, and Terri Janke eloquently grounds us in this disturbing but common childhood experience. I thank Ms. Janke, already a well-published and celebrated indigenous Australian author, for sharing this story with us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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who once e-mailed me a chapter of his PhD thesis while we were both studying at ANU. His work on the body, history, and cross-cultural relations in Australia very much inspires me and my students.

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Kam bati n raba and vinaka vaka levu to the contributors for responding to the call for submissions and generously sharing their writing. I hope that all of them, and especially the first-time authors, continue their critical and compassionate engagement with life in the Pacific.

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at the Australian National University. In 2006 she was a Macmillan Brown Research Scholar at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. Her research and teaching interests are in the history of phosphate mining in the Pacific, popular culture and consumption in Oceania, Pacific dance studies, visual ethnography, and theory and method for Pacific studies. She is currently working on a book manuscript, "Between Our Islands: A Multi-sited Ethnography of Banaban Phosphate." She also developed the "Culture Moves" Pacific dance studies resource Web site at www.hawaii.edu/cpis/dance based on the successful "Culture Moves! Dance in Oceania from hiva to hip hop" event held in 2005 at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington.

Notes

1. The island of Banaba or Ocean Island is now a part of the Republic of Kiribati (formerly the Gilbert Islands) in the Central Pacific. There are both cultural differences and strong connections between the peoples of these islands. However, Banabans and I-Kiribati are still divided over the history of phosphate mining administered by the British, Australian, and New Zealand governments between 1900 and 1980. Taxing of the industry allowed for income to be used for the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC). Local GEIC and especially Gilbert Island leaders defended this right aggressively, while Banabans saw this as unfair since it was their island being mined. Thus, earlier cultural connections between the islands in the Gilberts and Banaba started to break down, especially after the Banabans were removed to Fiji in 1945. Banabans then began an independence movement against the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony and constructed a new culture and identity on Rabi Island in direct opposition to their Kiribati relatives. The independence movement was not successful but intermarriage and other exchanges continue today while the feud on identity remains.
2. The 1987 and 2000 coups in Fiji are usually attributed to tensions between Fijians and Indo-Fijians and to struggles over political power and land, rather than to problems within each of those communities. The multitude of other cultures and economic agendas that surround these two main groups are rarely factored into the discourse or scholarly analyses. It was apparent on stage at the St. Joseph's concert that the girls, while incredibly creative and positive in their approach, had only the polarizing Fijian/Indo-Fijian framework to address racial tensions in Fiji. St. Joseph's is an all-girl Catholic secondary school in Suva.
3. See, for example, the critical and hilarious work of the New Zealand-based Laughing Samoans, the Naked Samoans, the animated television series *bro'Town*, and in Hawai'i, comedians Frank De Lima, and Da Braddahs & Friends.

Reference

Souder, Laura M.

- 1992 *Daughters of the Island: Contemporary Chamorro Women Organizers on Guam*. Second edition. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.